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# Experiencing Live Musical Theatre Performance: *La Cage Aux Folles* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper explores how empathetic responses and emotional identification can be stimulated and manipulated in live musical theatre performances. An empathetic response occurs through emotional identification with the character and the plot situation that can be activated on an intellectual level through signification. At the same time, the audience is involved in a mimetic response to physical and vocal gesture that ensures a muscular memory of similar movements and the attached emotional states, emotional states that are amplified by music and song. These cognitive and physical responses can stimulate and manipulate emotional memory in individual spectators who exchange mimetic responses with other spectators through emotional contagion which creates an atmosphere or energy that feeds back to the performers, and so the whole group is provoked into greater emotional release. Millie Taylor is Reader in the Performing Arts at the University of Winchester, UK. She has a particular interest in music theatre including the uses of voice. Her latest book is *Singing for Musicals* (2008).*

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**W**hy do audiences continue to attend live performances? Is there an experiential difference between live and mediated forms? And if mediation has altered live forms so that there is little difference between the live and the mediated, why attend the live? Or perhaps the fact that many popular performances are not reproduced – using intellectual property laws to resist reproduction in different media – may encourage a behavioural anomaly? These questions provide a catalyst for an examination of the live performances of *La Cage Aux Folles*<sup>2</sup> and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*<sup>3</sup> seen in London's West End during 2009.

*La Cage Aux Folles* focuses on the relationship of two gay men, Georges, the MC of the gay night club of the title, and his partner, Albin, a drag artist and star of the show. Together they have raised Georges' son, Jean-Michel, from his marriage to Sylvia. Jean-Michel has announced his engagement and wants to bring his prospective, and deeply conservative, in-laws to meet his parents. He

first asks Albin to leave so that Georges and Sylvia are presented as his parents. Then, when Sylvia is not available, Albin steps in and plays Sylvia. Naturally the subterfuge is revealed as Albin, at the end of a song as Sylvia, does what he always does at the end of his drag performances and lifts off his wig for the 'reveal'. But of course it all works out and the young lovers are united and Georges and Albin return to their happy partnership.

*Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, set in Australia, concerns two female impersonators, Tick/Mitzi, Adam/Felicia and a transsexual, Bernadette. They are all performers in Sydney's drag clubs. Tick discovers he has a young son living in Alice Springs, the result of a former relationship, so he persuades the other two to go with him on a road trip to perform there. They travel in a coach they name Priscilla. The plot is the road trip during which the characters' former lives are revealed and changes are made. Bernadette meets a man en route and at the end of the trip decides to stay with him in Alice Springs. Tick finds his son and begins to take some responsibility as a father, taking him back to Sydney for a holiday.

There are a number of similarities between these two shows. Both concern the lives of characters who are drag artists, and encourage empathetic engagement of audiences with characters.<sup>4</sup> Both also contain diegetic performances by those drag artists: they incorporate the show within a show format that is a feature of the musical theatre canon. Both also incorporate the layering of performer, character and character's alter ego. Where they differ from each other is in the ways they promote audience attachment and involvement, especially in relation to the vocal identity of the performers.

In *La Cage Aux Folles* the principal drag artist, Albin, sings in his own - male - voice so that the attachment between audience and performer is maintained through the 'show' songs. These diegetic songs are original music composed for the show. The show songs are, consequently, perceived as contributing to the character revelation. In contrast, the 'show' songs in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* are a combination of materials gathered from popular culture and interpolated into the show. The songs are performed by the characters lip-synching to a group of visible, onstage, pop divas.<sup>5</sup> This strategy clearly references the lip-synching performances of Sydney's drag scene, from whence the film and show derive. They also contribute to the production of texture and complexity in the interpretation of the combination of source music, live performance and lip-synched performance.<sup>6</sup> This creates a different construction of vocal identity for the characters' 'onstage' performances that encourages audiences to read 'onstage' and 'offstage' performances differently. The result is that the diegetic performances have a different function in the promotion of audience involvement and entertainment and the perception of 'liveness' in these two shows. In both cases, though, there are factors that counter Philip Auslander's argument that live performances are simply replications of, or raw material for, mediatization.<sup>7</sup>

In *Liveness* (1999) Philip Auslander concludes that most performances include technology – at the very least in amplification. Some live performances are reshaped to the demands of mediatization, others recreate mediatized

performances in live settings. This is certainly true of musical theatre in which the transferrals between stage and film are increasingly numerous. Auslander argues that over time the relationship between live and mediatized changes, such that at first the mediatized is modelled on the live, but gradually the mediatized usurps the place of the live in the cultural economy. This results in a reversal so that the live form then replicates the mediatized, which he suggests is apparent in the contemporary - as of his writing in 1999 - relationship of theatre and television.<sup>8</sup> He draws on two other theories to conclude that the mediatization of live events is a means of making those events respond to an audience desire for televisual intimacy.<sup>9</sup> This relies on Jacques Attali's argument that the economy of repetition emerged when production of unique objects was no longer profitable,<sup>10</sup> and Walter Benjamin's proposal that the audience's desire for reproducible cultural objects resulted from a relationship characterised by proximity and intimacy.<sup>11</sup> Auslander concludes that mediatized forms enjoy more cultural presence, prestige and profit than live forms, and that "any change in the near future is likely to be toward a further diminution of the symbolic capital associated with live events."<sup>12</sup>

Auslander's arguments are persuasive in identifying the fact that technologies have always affected live performance and that live performance is often repeated within a commercial framework. However, they raise the question of why audiences still attend live performances unless the experience has some fundamental differences from mediatized forms. The particular works that have been chosen as examples here are available in filmic portrayals, albeit in different productions and with different musical scores. What I will argue here is that there is a cognitive communication in live musical theatre performances that can be stimulated in different ways. This can produce an experience of co-presence at a unique moment, intimacy, cognitive empathy and emotional contagion that remains important in the continuing popularity of live musical theatre as entertainment.

### ***Strategies for signifying intimacy and the unique moment***

British Pantomime and stand-up comedy use particular strategies for signifying the uniqueness of each performance that are instructive here. Pantomime is reproducible from performance to performance with as many as thirteen performances per week for between three and twelve weeks, and from year to year. Commercial companies in the United Kingdom like QDos rework the production of an existing pantomime for ten years or so. Other companies, especially repertory companies generally have a shorter run of eight to twelve shows per week for three to five weeks and produce a new show each year.<sup>13</sup> Given this level of repetition the performance becomes slick, physical comedy is detailed and precise, and pantomime might be assumed to exemplify the idea that performance can attain the efficiency of its televisual or recorded cousins. However, pantomime incorporates strategies that make it unique at each performance - or at least signify that it is unique. Live performance is necessarily unique because performers and audiences will respond differently to each other on each occasion - so the essential fact of live performance causes infinite variation within defined parameters. But pantomime and to some extent other

comedy and clown performances also incorporate particular strategies that signify the event as unique or actually create unique moments in each performance. This relates to Benjamin's theory that an audience desires a relationship characterized by proximity and intimacy and Attali's reference to the importance of the unique object. What these strategies do is to replace the intimacy of the small scale with the intimacy of the unique object or the 'personal' touch.

The events that make each performance distinct include the incorporation of audience members in the comedy. This can be accomplished, for example in pantomime, by throwing sweets into the audience, chasing through the audience or asking audience members for information or some other contribution to comedy or narrative. Some of these strategies are used in stand-up comedy and others in circus clowning. The point here, though, is that this incorporation of the audience lends spontaneity and playfulness to the performance. It also signifies to the audience that the performance is particular to them and unique to that occasion. There are other strategies in pantomime to signify uniqueness, such as topical reference and cod corpsing that may not, in fact, be specific to an individual performance.<sup>14</sup> However, pantomime maintains the appearance of playfulness so that each performance is not only live in terms of the co-presence of audience and performers but also unique in the liveness of those moments. Through these moments of contact pantomime creates a sense of intimacy and connection between audience and performers.

This is highlighted when variety acts are incorporated – a feature that is in decline in repertory pantomime but still apparent in some commercial productions. When feats of physical skill, high energy or danger are performed, the audience is assured of the reality of the event by the sight of the performance. Visual identification plays a part in verifying skills that could be manipulated in a recorded environment. The triple somersault a performer turns or the impossible and dangerous leap she makes are seen to be real by an audience who are present, but could be dismissed in a recording as faked through editing. The same is true of magic tricks and illusion. The skill of the performer and the wonder of the illusion are verified by the immediacy of live performance, or of sight and sound. The performance of song can use the same strategy, especially as the performer incorporates the emotional sob, or the impossibly high climax that is verified by the shared experience. The presence of musicians onstage or in the pit, or reference to them, creates a reflexive circularity and simultaneously authenticates the live musical performance. Even the appearance of celebrities relates to this argument because their presence is verified by visual and aural identification. Intimacy with the revered 'other' of celebrity or stardom results from the sharing of the space and time of performance in place of the usual mediation through television or film. It is also notable that television pantomime and variety shows are filmed in front of a live audience to recreate this sense that there are witnesses to the veracity of tricks, illusions or appearance.

These examples link to Auslander's discussion of performance and the importance of speech acts in court cases that use individual witnessing to assure

the truth of individual testimony and memory.<sup>15</sup> Despite limited use of recorded evidence, the use of video in court cases has not become widespread because presence, or temporal and spatial simultaneity, is deemed to contribute to the legal process of discerning 'truth.' Mladen Dolar remarks that "[w]e should note in passing the link between the voice and establishing the truth: there is a point where truth has to be vocal and where the written truth, although literally the same will not do".<sup>16</sup> Equally, popular performances that contain variety acts – both pantomime and variety – rely on visual and aural verification by the audience. This encourages audiences to a greater awareness of the 'danger' of a particular acrobatic leap, the magical illusion, or, indeed, the presence of the performer.<sup>17</sup> The importance of the live witnessing to the efficacy of these acts may contribute to the continuing popularity of such performances.

Stand-up comedy uses similar devices, incorporating the audience into the event so that it is unique and particular to each audience and each occasion. In his recent tour of the UK and Ireland, Dara O'Briain made a point of the particularity, liveness and uniqueness of each performance as created by the audience interaction.<sup>18</sup> However, the experience of watching the televised recording of this live performance is to be an outsider, separated from and looking in on, the live event. In effect, the filmed recording works not only as a mediated version of the event, but as a marketing device in creating a desire to experience the live event. Perhaps this is a form of mediatization, but one that promotes liveness as a desirable experience.

Musical theatre rarely incorporates the variety skills, direct audience interaction or the physical and slapstick comedy of pantomime or stand-up comedy, and certainly relates to one aspect of Auslander's description of mediatization in the case of theatre musicals adapted and reproduced for film during the Golden Age,<sup>19</sup> and, more recently, the re-production of film musicals onstage.<sup>20</sup> The movement remains a two way street, however, with recent filmed versions of *Chicago* and *Mamma Mia* and staged versions of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Hairspray*.

Live performance has become increasingly commodified. This is notable in the globalisation of some musical productions with very little accommodation for location or even sometimes language.<sup>21</sup> At the performance level Susan Russell records that even actors have to conform to the staging decisions and dramatic interpretations of an original production. Speaking of *Phantom of the Opera* she records that "[w]hen a new actor enters the Broadway show, they are taught how the original actor did the role, and the new actor is expected to simulate a frozen image that is retrieved by management from a documented past."<sup>22</sup> Later she refers to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* to frame the experience of disciplined and docile bodies "precipitated by hours of surveillance."<sup>23</sup> Her reading of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* leads to the conclusion that "corporate culture cannot allow anything other than simulations, and the end result of simulation is the death 'of the true, of [the] lived experience.'"<sup>24</sup> Finally, Russell asks "Is not live theatre made living by the endless possibilities within time, place, and space?"<sup>25</sup>

Despite Russell's experience and the increasing commodification and globalisation of some musical theatre performances, these practices are only one part of the story. Whether or not these practices are used by all companies is debatable especially in local or regional productions, but the effects for audiences even at 'commodified' productions can be more diverse. There is an experience of liveness in pantomime and comedy (identified above) that contains strategies for audience involvement which is necessarily different from a recorded or technologically reproduced production. The production of *La Cage Aux Folles* contains some of these strategies.

### ***La Cage Aux Folles***

In autumn 2008 the Menier Chocolate Factory – a small scale producing house in London – mounted a new production of *La Cage Aux Folles*.<sup>26</sup> I saw the production in August 2009 after its transfer to a fairly intimate West End venue, the Playhouse Theatre. The production incorporated many of the features of intimacy and the signification of uniqueness that have been identified above. The design of the production incorporated a second proscenium arch with a small forestage so that the diegetic performances could be presented and the theatre audience had the experience of being involved in the performance as the club audience. Four tables were raised at the front of the auditorium around which were seated audience members who were repeatedly spoken to, gestured to, sung to, and incorporated into the performance. The row of boxes that were populated by audience members in the auditorium were extended into the set to house the band, some of whose members could be seen from stage and auditorium and with whom the characters interacted.

The interaction with the audience began immediately after the overture when Georges, as club MC, introduced the evening's events as he spoke to and shook hands with audience members. In the introduction to the 'midnight show' later in the first act Georges included a short stand-up comedy routine with audience interaction by encouraging the audience to lean to one side, which the stalls audience all did. This interaction continued throughout all the club scenes and created the sense of a club performance, but also signified this performance as uniquely created in interaction with this group of audience members. Even though it is almost identical on each occasion the effects of participation create a different level and type of involvement for audiences. In the opening number of the male drag chorus, the Cagelles, 'We are what we are', there was reflexive upstaging as individual dancers competed with each other, commented to the stage manager offstage and threw beach balls into the audience. Later in 'La Cage Aux Folles' dancers danced on the audience tables and caressed men sitting at them.

Even in some of the early 'realistic' scenes Georges addressed the audience in scripted asides about Albin such as "See how she listens to me." Solo songs were addressed to the audience whether staged as diegetic performance in the club, or backstage. During the song 'Mascara' Albin sang partly to the audience and partly to himself while dressing for the show. These are all strategies that encourage audience members to interact with and therefore respond to the

performance as a playful and live event. These strategies also encourage the reflexive awareness of the theatrical event.

In Act Two, Albin is persuaded to pretend to 'be' a woman (Jean-Michel's mother, Sylvia) rather than a female impersonator so that his stepson's new in-laws will accept him/her. In the restaurant, Chez Jacqueline, s/he performs 'The Best of Times' sitting on the front of the stage in an intertextual reference to mediated images of Judy Garland. In the course of the song s/he takes the hand of an audience member to whom s/he sings the first part of the song. The confusion between drag performance and 'pretend real' performance, alongside the reference to the iconic performance of Judy Garland and the interaction with the audience makes this a particularly interesting moment. The question of who is singing is complex with layers of Roger Allam (the performer), Albin (the character), Sylvia (who Albin is pretending to be) and Garland (in the imagery of the performance and in the iconography of drag performers). The oscillation between these various facets of the actor/character that the audience categorises and understands is described by Bruce McConachie as 'conceptual blending.'<sup>27</sup> The argument here is that audiences oscillate between the various roles, "spectators combine actors and characters into blended actor/characters"<sup>28</sup> and that there is a cognitive adjustment in the audience's reading of the relative balance between the various personas in different types of performance.

In this performance the clarity between diegetic and non-diegetic performance is deliberately blurred. The audience is drawn into the performance as participants inside and outside the restaurant and the club. They are also involved as active interpreters of the performance and the theatre event, a role stimulated by the complex layers of cognition that are activated. All these features create the sense of a unique performance even though the actual difference from night to night is limited. These types of playful interactions increase the sense of engagement the audience has with the performance; laughter, clapping along, and emotional response to the story are all increased as a result.

This is only one example, but it demonstrates that by no means do all musicals or productions conform to the practices that Russell describes in *Phantom of the Opera*. Moreover, it is possible that even in those large scale productions that do enforce rigid practices and a particular type of discipline among performers, vocal and musical gestures still have the power to communicate and make cognitive connections with audiences. Where *La Cage Aux Folles* was particularly effective was in the stimulation of the sense of co-presence at a unique moment of intimacy with the performer/characters and an emotional involvement in the characters' lives.

### ***Experiencing the Live Event***

So why do audiences go to live musical theatre performances if all they are getting is a reproduction that they could see equally well on television or film? First of all, there is the obvious answer that most musical theatre performances are not recorded on film in the same productions that they are

performed on stage. Intellectual property law is used by many producers to limit or ban video recording of performances except for their own archival reference. Archives that contain footage of live performances include the Royal Shakespeare Company, Royal National Theatre, the Victoria & Albert Museum's Theatre Collection in London and the Theatre on Film and Tape archive in the Library of Performing Arts in New York. All of these can only be viewed, with permission, within the archives where no copying is possible.

When watching footage in these archives the viewer is aware of the fact that this is recording of live theatre performance because of the limited camera positions. These recordings do not conform to contemporary cinematic practices because they are staged for theatre, the human eye, and generally a frontal and panoramic viewpoint. The music and sound are arranged differently, the acting style demonstrates the awareness of audience size and position. Speech patterns, diction and vocal range indicate the size and type of performance space. And, in musical theatre, song and dance intervene in ways that are no longer common in film – although there are exceptions such as *Moulin Rouge*. The viewer of the archived performance is seeing a mediated aide-memoire that in no way recreates the experience of attendance at a live event, and, since it doesn't conform to established cinematic practices, it may appear awkward or less polished.<sup>29</sup>

The result of this is that the only possibility for consumers to experience the show is through the live experience, and attendance is made necessary through saturation marketing to increase the desirability of the event. This process is generally argued to have begun with Cameron Mackintosh's pre-opening release of the music and the pre-opening publicity campaigns for the original productions of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Cats*, which introduced the phenomenon of global brand identification to musical theatre.<sup>30</sup>

Large scale productions may conform to Auslander's view that theatre directors have been influenced to become more filmic in their concepts and designs as a result of the ubiquity of cinema and television. On the other hand, Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen argues that in the 1980s and 1990s the influence of classical theatre and epic social drama "equipped [directors] to tackle musicals using different staging vocabularies than the great Broadway choreographer-directors."<sup>31</sup> These vocabularies relied on less realistic sets and designs, greater use of the chorus and fluid movement between times and places. These practices may have been influenced by cinema but, especially in design and use of chorus, are not like those of cinema. However, there is no doubt that musical theatre is highly technological using electronic instruments and microphones, computerised lighting and sound systems and sometimes computerised scenery operation. This has consequences for how the performer is perceived given the argument above about the relationship of live presence, witnessing and perceptions of theatrical 'truth' or 'reality.'

### ***The experience of empathy***<sup>32</sup>

Researchers are now applying cognitive science to dance, theatre and



music in order to begin to understand the experience of attendance at performances. The concept of kinaesthetic empathy has developed in dance partly from the theory of *Einfühlung* proposed by Theodor Lipps in 1909.<sup>33</sup> It suggests that when audiences are watching dance they experience the dance mimetically as though they are undertaking the movement. Ann Daly argues that “although it has a visual component, [dance] is fundamentally a kinesthetic art whose apperception is grounded not just in the eye but in the entire body.”<sup>34</sup> More recently Beatriz Calvo-Merino *et al* have proved that some parts of the brains of audience members watching dance are stimulated as though they are undertaking the physical activity themselves.<sup>35</sup> This relies on the activation of mirror neurons in the pre-motor cortex of the brain through which audiences mirror the gestural activities they observe. Such mirroring derives in part from basic learning instincts. Children learn through imitation and mirroring, and most early learning relies on copying.<sup>36</sup> This remains a feature of skills acquisition in humans throughout their lives. Bonnie Eckard records that the activation of mirror neurons in the brains of audience members activates the synapses as though the watcher were carrying out the gesture. Since embodying emotions or physical actions can stimulate the memory and the feeling of that emotion, this in turn can activate memories and emotions from which audiences can extrapolate meaning.<sup>37</sup>

Bruce McConachie applies the work of Paula Niedenthal *et al* to the theatre audience.<sup>38</sup> He concludes that in the theatre, where empathy is encouraged, “imitation and embodiment tend to be heightened.”<sup>39</sup> The process can have four parts. Individuals embody imitated emotions, which produce corresponding emotions. Imagining people and events also produces emotions and feelings, and those embodied emotions mediate cognitive responses.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, these responses are often too small to be consciously recognised but impact on behaviour so that as a species we are able to attune to each other. “Embodying others’ emotions produces emotions in us, even if the situation is an imagined or fictitious one.”<sup>41</sup> Although these responses are subconscious, audience members can choose to resist identification, but through this cognitive awareness they can empathetically sense what characters / performers are feeling within the safe frame of the performance situation and, when aware of the emotion, can choose to be moved or to resist. More importantly for narrative performances, audiences can attribute meaning to the observed gestures.

Similar processes are apparent in response to musical gesture, and several scientific studies make similar claims about mirror neurons activating sub-vocalization or vocal mirroring.<sup>42</sup> Istvan Molnar-Szakacs and Kate Overy survey recent work on neuroscience to claim that “Music has a unique ability to trigger memories, awaken emotions and to intensify our social experiences.”<sup>43</sup> An important point here is that this emotional contagion or empathy is not only a response from audiences to characters onstage, but something that is communicated between audiences at an event, whether staged or otherwise, and is also an effect that is communicated from audiences back to performers. Performers comment on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ audiences, and to some extent this can be the result of less focused performances or performers having had a bad day themselves. However, there is also an experience for performers of the audience

– perceived as a homogenous group – and their response to that particular performance. This is communicated through silence as much as sound, through concentrated attention or raucous laughter, but the aural and physical communication that suggests attention and engagement is the result of an emotional connection between audience and performers. The sounds created in the audience are culturally appropriate to the enacted situation that is being shared by the audience as a group and as individuals – assuming they have a common cultural context. This effect, according to Scherer and Zentner, is heightened in musical performance.<sup>44</sup> The combination of music (that intensifies social experience), vocal expression (that reveals the emotional body of the performer), and intellectual empathy with the enacted situation leads to a high level of emotional identification for audiences at musical theatre performances.

Although all the above suggests that emotion can be stimulated by music, there remain doubts about the specificity of the production of emotion as a result of listening to music without other stimuli, although physiological arousal has also been scientifically proved.<sup>45</sup> However, Isabelle Peretz summarises current knowledge about musical emotions from a biological perspective, looking at facial expressions and neural correlates of musical emotions. She includes a section on vocal emotion focusing on the tone of the voice and non-verbal expression which has been proved to be remarkably specific.<sup>46</sup> She says that “within the speech signal, the recognition of vocal cues that are emotionally meaningful is clearly dissociable from the recognition of vocal cues that are semantically informative.”<sup>47</sup> What this suggests in terms of the current argument is that voice and song in musical theatre have the capacity to move audiences through pre-motor responses and mirror neurons that create a mimetic response to the portrayal of emotion in the voice and body of the performer. This is amplified by the musical stimulation and a physically embodied witnessing of the performance events. In other words the presence of music and the response to song has the capacity to elicit a greater emotional release than performance without those elements.

This does not necessarily suggest a different response to live performance than might be achieved by recorded performance, but does suggest that musical and physical actions create an effect on the viewer/listener that is greater than might be assumed simply from the intellectual stimulation. When these effects are linked with co-presence with performers, interaction and cognitive blending, and the experience of ‘atmosphere’ or ‘energy’ created between audience and performers, it becomes clear that the experience of live musical theatre performance can be substantially different from a recorded or mediatized performance.

### ***Priscilla, Queen of the Desert***

The stage musical version of *Priscilla* is particularly interesting because it capitalises on the distancing effects of vocal disembodiment for its comedy and spectacle, and the emotional attachment created through hearing the voice as embodied for empathy. The show opens as three divas are flown in – they remain hovering high over the stage – singing ‘Downtown’. In the following scene in a

Sydney nightclub the divas again sing. This time they perform 'I've never been to me' while Tick, dressed in his drag queen outfit as his alter ego, Mitzi, lip-synchs the song with exaggerated gestures and flamboyant poses in an onstage diegetic performance. In a number of the other diegetic performances during the show such as 'Shake your groove thing' in scene thirteen, 'Girls just wanna have fun' in scene fourteen, and 'Hot Stuff' in scene fifteen, the divas sing while the drag performers provide lip-synching, exaggerated gesture and elaborately costumed spectacle.

In other scenes in which the characters are expressing 'themselves' they sing in their own voices. Examples include 'Always on my mind' sung by Tick to his son Benji, 'Come into my world' sung by Adam and 'Both Sides Now' sung by Adam, Tick and Bernadette. In these songs the voices appear to emanate from the bodies of the characters and contain emotion that can be realistically derived from the plot, and empathetically mirrored by the audience.

At other times in the show there are fantasy moments such as when Felicia dresses up and sits on top of the travelling bus to lip-synch to 'Sempre Libera' sung by the divas in scene nine, and the company and the divas appear in the middle of the desert to sing 'Macarthur Park' in scene sixteen. Though these moments could be read partly as rehearsals they develop into excessive spectacles. For example, in 'Macarthur Park' the chorus appears in the middle of the desert clothed in fairy cake dresses with candles on their heads, carrying umbrellas. Scene twelve is also clearly an illusion in which Bernadette's youth in *Les Girls* is re-enacted by a large chorus to the song 'A Fine Romance.'<sup>48</sup> Bernadette disrupts the fantasy by explaining the techniques of lip-synching that she has perfected, adding another layer of vocal uncertainty. Carol Langley describes the moments in Sydney drag performances when performers draw attention to the reveal either through removing their wig or stopping singing during a lip-synched performance.<sup>49</sup> Here the reveal occurs on occasions throughout the performance because of the presence of the divas as well as through other devices such as Bernadette's explanation of technique. The playfulness of excess and spectacle is promoted alongside the reflexivity of the disembodied voice.

The separation of voice and body is celebrated in the lip-synching sections, especially when reinforced by the presence of the divas who are actually singing. The audience can watch the divas who are singing with no semblance of 'realistic acting'. These are pop performances with clearly audible sound processing and the gestures of pop performance. Or the audience can watch the lip-synching performer who is using melodramatic gesture, wearing flamboyant costume and attracting attention through size and spectacle as well as through the carefully observed lip-synching. I found myself equally engaged, torn between the images as well as fascinated by the artistry of the lip-synching itself. These moments are interesting because of the distance created by the presence of both types of performance. They highlight the artificiality and the comedy of the lip-synched performance, and, in fact, become a joyous and contagious celebration of artificiality.

The moments of camp comedy and spectacle are enjoyed through the knowing disruption of vocal embodiment that results in comic spectacle and is shared in a contagious wave of energy, with audiences experiencing an emotional contagion of laughter and pleasure. This disruption is caused by the parodic recognition of the song sung by the divas, and its performance outside the show by another star performer in a different situation. Simultaneously there is the blending of character, performer, and lip-synched vocal and physical imagery in the drag performances. This is similar to the moment in *La Cage* when Albin's imagery was reminiscent of Judy Garland. But the number of musical offerings and the diversity of genres and performance styles is exaggerated here in a reflexive theatricality and a reminder of a host of popular performances, musical revue and Sydney drag performances.

However, the show clearly demonstrates the desire for certain moments and songs to be perceived as 'realistic' within the plot and puts them in the mouths of the characters when they are vulnerable or emotional, and when the emotions are intended to be read as 'truthful' to the characters and story. The sound design and the characterisations contribute to the reading and to an empathetically experienced emotion. There is still a blend between performer, character and the previous imagined performances of a particular song, but audiences clearly understand these moments differently. The sound of the voices in these songs is technologically reproduced in ways that locate the sound in the body of the performer, and the emotion of the character is perceived simultaneously in the rendition of words and music. There is a different aesthetic of sound design and performance style here that encourages audiences to understand the particular blend of character / drag performer as weighted heavily towards character, even while observing the playful incorporation of known songs.

This leaves the moments of spectacle that are identified in spectacular costume, excessive design and disembodied voice to be perceived as 'unreal,' larger than life and heightened camp. This creates a relationship between a performance of emotional 'truth' and a performance of 'artifice.' Langley suggests that such moments of deconstruction are "an act of defiance; the performer who exposes the mechanics of the act is, in a way, more defiant and more in control than the one who strives to present a seamless show."<sup>50</sup> Here, perhaps, is a defiance of the trope of integration in musical theatre that offers comedic, parodic and spectacular opportunities for excess. Audience attachment and empathy is juxtaposed with distance, reflexivity and spectacle, and this binary is enacted through vocal embodiment.

### **Conclusion**

This does not suggest that live performance is any different from, for example, a filmed performance in terms of the audience identification with characters and plot situations and empathetic response to emotional, physical or vocal gestures. It does suggest that live performances contain some features that are different from mediatized performances, and stimulate different types of attachment in audiences. In live musical theatre performances many things are

happening simultaneously, that exist along a continuum. Live performance can stimulate the experience of witnessing, intimacy and co-presence at a unique event, the contagion of social mirroring within the audience and in interaction with the performance, the effects of vocal touch and cognitive empathy, and constructed perceptions of 'truth' and 'artifice' in characterisation through cognitive blending. Each performance might contain some of these features in different degrees and so might appeal to different audience members in different ways. The two performances analysed here contain a different balance of these features so that *La Cage* is perceived as 'integrated' but unique at each performance, and emotionally engaging. *Priscilla* is a revue style spectacular that creates a joyously outrageous and disruptive camp comedy, but also, an emotionally contagious and moving experience.

The effects of witnessing and co-presence certainly appear to be more apparent the more the performance is perceived as live, and it is here that popular theatre can be particularly successful at engaging audiences in an interaction that is unique at each performance. The effects of intimacy produced by vocal touch are augmented by technology – though there appears to be an optimum beyond which the opposite effect is achieved – but, when linked with co-presence and music point to an intensity of experience and the perception of an emotional connection that is different from that in recorded performance. Equally, physical movement is re-enacted by spectators in all performances, but is linked to witnessing and again a perception of attachment and 'truth' in live and especially live vocal performances.

Live musical theatre performances are mediatized in that they exist in a commercial market where they are endlessly repeated. They use technology and have intertextual interactions with film, television and other media. However, vocal signification and kinaesthetic embodiment of emotion and action alongside the unique moments in any performance give rise to a physical witnessing that derives from the live presence of audiences and performers, and feeds back into the energy and atmosphere of the performance. So I would contend that live musical theatre performance creates a different experience of entertainment than its mediatized cousins, even when the performance is supported by technology and exists within a mediatic world.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the Popular Entertainment Working Group of the IFTR for comments on an earlier version of this paper, and to the editor and peer reviewer for feedback in developing this article.

<sup>2</sup> Book by Harvey Fierstein, Music and Lyrics by Jerry Herman, based on the play *La Cage Aux Folles* by Jean Poiret which has been filmed as *The Bird Cage*. Attended on 03.08.09.

<sup>3</sup> Book by Stephan Elliott and Allan Scott, Songs selected and interpolated by Simon Phillips, based on the *Latent Image / Specific Films Motion Picture* distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc. Attended on 06.08.09.

<sup>4</sup> Not of direct relevance to this argument, both also concern the relationship between drag artists and their children.

<sup>5</sup> They are identified as 'Divas' in the programme.

- <sup>6</sup> Carol Langley, "Borrowed Voice: The Art of Lip-Synching in Sydney Drag," *Australasian Drama Studies*, 48 (April 2006), 5-17.
- <sup>7</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 162.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 158.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 159.
- <sup>10</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The political economy of music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 41 quoted in Auslander, 26.
- <sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," in *Illuminations* (Fontana Press, 1992[1936]), 211-244.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 162.
- <sup>13</sup> These figures and the examples in the following discussion derive from my work on pantomime in *British Pantomime Performance* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2007).
- <sup>14</sup> To corpse is to laugh inadvertently and out of character during a performance onstage, which has the effect of allowing audiences to see the performer behind the character. Cod corpsing is a planned version of the corpse that, if done well, can be perceived as a unique moment of direct contact between performer and audience.
- <sup>15</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*, 114-31. The relationship between the perception of 'truth,' the performance of knowledge and voice is argued from a philosophical perspective in Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), 108-12.
- <sup>16</sup> Dolar *A Voice and Nothing More*, 109.
- <sup>17</sup> Potentially dangerous acts are rehearsed to the point that they are not, in fact, dangerous. There is, however, a perception of their difficulty that is promoted by the participants. The achievement of the act, despite its perceived danger, is highlighted and verified by audience presence. Equally, with magical tricks that are clearly illusions, the illusion is witnessed and becomes efficacious as a result of that witnessing.
- <sup>18</sup> *Dara O'Briain Talks Funny: Live in London*, recorded at Hammersmith Apollo in 2008, broadcast on BBC Television 19.07.09. A similar opening speech is available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKczVtVFi70>
- <sup>19</sup> Such as the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals.
- <sup>20</sup> Such as *The Producers*, and the Disney musicals *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast*.
- <sup>21</sup> This is discussed in Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Susan Russell, "The performance of discipline on Broadway," *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 1:1 (2007), 99.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 101.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 105.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 106.
- <sup>26</sup> Directed by Terry Johnson, with choreography by Lynne Page. I saw Roger Allam as Albin and Philip Quast as Georges.
- <sup>27</sup> Bruce McConachie, "Falsifiable Theories for Theatre and Performance Studies," *Theatre Journal* 59:4 (December 2007), 553-577. In this article the cognitive explanation of this oscillation derives from Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 559.
- <sup>29</sup> For more on this see Gay McAuley, "The video documentation of theatrical performance," *New Theatre Quarterly*, 38 (1994), 183-94.
- <sup>30</sup> Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 3-4.
- <sup>31</sup> The development of directorial practices in musical theatre is explored in Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen, *Directors and the new musical drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 143-6. This quotation, 59.
- <sup>32</sup> Some parts of this section build on an earlier article, "Don't dream it, be it: exploring signification, empathy and mimesis in relation to *The Rocky Horror Show*," *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 1:1 (2007), 57-71.
- <sup>33</sup> [http://www.watchingdance.org/research/kinesthetic\\_empathy/index.php](http://www.watchingdance.org/research/kinesthetic_empathy/index.php) accessed 30.05.09.
- <sup>34</sup> Ann Daly, "Dance History and Feminist Theory: Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze" in *Gender and Performance: the Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Tufts/University Press of New England: Hanover NH 1992) quoted in the website above.
- <sup>35</sup> Beatriz Calvo-Merino, et al., "Action observation and acquired motor skills: An fMRI study with expert dancers," *Cerebral Cortex*, 15 (2005), 1243-49. There is an AHRC project underway

exploring kinaesthetic empathy in dance and relating it to the pleasure experienced by the observer. A sub-area of that research project mentions the relationship with music and sound and its effect on empathy and pleasure.

<sup>36</sup> E. Tolbert, "Untying the Music/Language Knot," in *Music, Sensation, and Sensuality*, Linda Austern, ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 87.

<sup>37</sup> This is developed in a conference paper by Bonnie Eckard, "Power of the body: Mirror neurons and audience response," *International Federation for Theatre Research*, Lisbon, Portugal, July 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Paula M. Niedenthal et al, "Embodiment in the Acquisition and Use of Emotion Knowledge," in *Emotion and Consciousness*, Lisa Feldman Barret et al., eds. (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), quoted in McConachie, "Falsifiable Theories," 563.

<sup>39</sup> McConachie, "Falsifiable Theories," 563.

<sup>40</sup> Niedenthal quoted in McConachie, "Falsifiable Theories," 562.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 563.

<sup>42</sup> J. D. Smith, et al., "Subvocalisation and auditory imagery: Interactions between the inner ear and inner voice," in *Auditory Imagery*, D. Riesberg, ed. (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992). J. D. Smith, M. Wilson & D. Reisberg, "The role of subvocalisation in auditory imagery," *Neuropsychologia*, 33 (1995), 1433-54.

Other scientific work on vocal and physical mirror imaging or motor facilitation has been undertaken by V. Gazzola et al., "Empathy and the somatotopic auditory mirror system in humans," *Current Biology*, 16:18 (2006), 802-04; V. Gallese, "Embodied simulation: from mirror neuron systems to interpersonal relations," *Novartis Foundation Symposium*, 278 (2007), 3-12 (discussion 12-19); G. Rizzolatti, et al., "Premotor cortex and the recognition of motor actions," *Brain Research: Cognitive Brain Research*, 3:2 (1996), 131-41; A. P. Saygin, et al., "In the footsteps of biological motion and multisensory perception: Judgment of audio-visual temporal relations are enhanced for upright walkers," *Psychological Science*, 19:5 (2008), 469-475.

<sup>43</sup> Istvan Molnar-Szakacs and Kate Overy, "Music and mirror neurons: from motion to "e"motion," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 1:3 (2006), 235-241.

<sup>44</sup> Scherer and Zentner, "Emotional effects of music," in *Music and Emotion*, Patrik N. Juslin and John Sloboda, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2001), 370.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 375.

<sup>46</sup> I. Peretz, "Listen to the brain: a biological perspective on musical emotions," in *Music and Emotion*, P. Juslin and J. Sloboda, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 105-134.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*. 123

<sup>48</sup> This refers to the character of Bernadette who, in the plot, had begun her drag career in the show *Les Girls*. (originally a film musical comedy by Cole Porter, in the early 1960s it had become the title of an all-male drag revue in Sydney).

<sup>49</sup> Langlely, "Borrowed Voice," 16.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 12.